

Urbanová, Ludmila

[Vachek, Josef. Prolegomena k dějinám Pražské školy jazykovědné
(Prolegomena to the history of the Prague School of Linguistics)]

Brno studies in English. 1999, vol. 25, iss. 1, pp. 180-182

ISBN 80-210-2230-2

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104502>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

sufficient monologue. By pitting often contradictory perspectives against one another, they have created a dialogue that is much concerned with our present sense of fragmentation, difference and fluidity of time and space. Nevertheless, one cannot but agree with the view that "diversity is not in itself a virtue" (p. 199) and however much we may celebrate it, there is an undercurrent of a longing for the unity of mutual understanding which *Daughters of Restlessness* has unmistakably captured.

Milada Franková

Josef Vachek: *Prolegomena k dějinám Pražské školy jazykovědné* (Prolegomena to the History of the Prague School of Linguistics), Nakladatelství H&H, 1999, 135 p.

The ninetieth anniversary of Josef Vachek's birth (born 1st March 1909 in Prague, died 31st March 1996 in Prague) is commemorated by a modest, tiny booklet which is his last manuscript.

In this "non-memoir" presentation, as it is labelled by Oldřich Leška, the author of the review attached to the text of Vachek's book, Vachek gives not only a lucid, succinct description of the origin, development and reputation of the Prague School, but also an evaluation of the state of the art of Czech linguistics from the viewpoint of the development of functionalist and structuralist conceptions, intertwined with the latest trends, against the background of the dramatic development of linguistic research in the 1930s and 1940s.

Within the temporal framework delimited by the overcoming of Neo-grammarians atomism and postulating the "conception of language as a functionally and structurally regarded systemic entity" (the quotation is taken from the book under discussion, p.10) Vachek presents an individually experienced, yet highly factual account of the atmosphere of the times which gave birth to the unparalleled international scope of the community under the name **The Prague Linguistic Circle** (Circle Linguistique de Prague).

The team spirit of the "classical period" has enriched 20th century linguistics in a very distinctive way, ranking Prague among the most influential and most inspiring world centres of linguistic research. The strong influence of the Prague conception came to the fore especially at the First International Linguistic Congress in the Hague in 1928, the First International Congress of Slavists in Prague in 1929 and the Second International Congress of Linguists in Geneva in 1931.

The label "**École de Prague**" first appeared before the First International Congress of Phonetic Sciences, which took place in Amsterdam in 1932. In his book, Vachek gives a very apt justification for the novelty and force of the Prague conception. On the one hand, it was based on the interface of two approaches to linguistic problems, those of synchrony and diachrony, on the other hand it was marked by the complementarity of two distinctly different trends within the Prague Linguistic Circle, namely

- (1) the **Trubetzkoy-Jakobsonian** trend, emphasizing structure
- (2) the **Mathesius Havránekian** trend, emphasizing function.

The former trend traced the general features of the system, the latter concentrated on internal relationships within the system.

The linguistic analysis of all levels of language was performed with regard to the function of language means, emphasizing stylistic differences. **Linguistic correctness** was seen in the Prague School as **functional appropriateness** of a given expression.

As stressed by Vachek, The Circle did not only determine the branch of study, but also its method of research, **linguistic characterology**, which, in Mathesius' words, tackles "only the important and basic features of the given language at a certain point in time, analyzes them on a general linguistic basis and tries to ascertain the relationships existing between them" (translated into Czech by the reviewer).

The characterology of language as a system which is permanently unbalanced, open, dynamic, based on the mutual relationship of the individual levels, has become a starting point for fruitful language research of considerable scope. Even in present-day situation, language research of such timeless value provides sufficient ground for research topics in areas delimited by the Circle.

In Chapter III under the title "*Personalities of the Foundation Generation of the Prague School*" the author gives a picture of the five founder members of the Prague School, namely Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, Jakobson, Havránek and Trnka. He makes the reader acquainted with the professional orientation of these scholars and emphasizes their different theoretical background as a precondition of their further development. He depicts the fates of these great personalities of modern linguistics and the difficult conditions in which they pursued their scholarly interests.

From Vachek's portrayals we learn especially about Mathesius' moral strength, his optimism and untiring diligence despite his ill health, and also about the most tragic circumstances in which Trubetzkoy was finishing the last chapters of his seminal work "*Grundzüge der Phonologie*" in the last days of his life. Jakobson is depicted by Vachek as a very active member of the Circle, its *spiritus agens*, who was also a very brave man. Vachek appreciates the positive influence of Havránek in the post-Marr period as well as Trnka's involvement in preserving Trubetzkoy-Jakobson correspondence for which Trnka found a hiding place during World War II.

Chapter IV under the title "*Difficult Post-War Decades of the Prague School*" contains Vachek's evaluation of the forty years of the post-war development of the Prague Linguistic Circle. The Circle has survived with regard to its principles, the real functioning of it, however, has been silenced. The activity of the Circle was resumed as late as on 15th February 1990 at its constituent assembly.

Vachek provides unbiased evidence about the time and people who were trying to continue the tradition of the Prague School and those who opposed it. He also gives an extensive account of the problems connected with the publication of books and collections of papers. It is especially the history of the rebirth of the Travaux which is of great interest for the readers.

In the last chapter Vachek expresses his considerations about the heritage of the Prague School for Czech and world linguistics. The reader is confronted with some doubts concerning the validity of Prague School ideas for present-day linguistics. Vachek tackles the relationship between diachrony and synchrony in linguistic research, the principle of immanent linguistic development, the distinction between central and peripheral elements, the dynamic character of the language system and the relationship between language levels.

In conclusion Vachek tries to answer the question formulated on page 75: "...is it still appropriate today to speak about the existence of the Prague School? Isn't it rather a once for ever gone, though famous, epoch of Czechoslovak linguistics?"

The answer given in the end of the book is optimistic, but simultaneously it is also binding for Czech linguists: "We can therefore safely declare that even in the further development of world linguistics this conception is capable of playing an important role in both the domestic and world linguistic context. To what extent it will really play this role depends on those who today are and tomorrow will be its representatives and carriers of its ideas and principles" (translated into English by the reviewer).

The book contains two appendices. In **Appendix I** Vachek includes the **Articles of the Society "Prague Linguistic Circle"**, officially approved of on 23rd October 1930 and signed by 15 members. The constituting assembly was held on 1st December 1930. Important data are presented with regard to the inner division of the circle into sections, namely phonological, for the investigation of poetic language, bibliographic and for the investigation of spoken Czech.

In **Appendix II** a survey of lectures held in the Circle in the years 1926-1952 is published according to accessible sources, the period between 1949-1952 being recorded only as a fragment. The survey is assessed by Vachek with regard to the activity of individual lecturers and their topics, bearing witness to the versatility of the lecturers and the wide scope of interest of this unique linguistic undertaking.

Ludmila Urbanová